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ABSTRACT

Twelve teenagers of Puerto Rican origin were interviewed to determine their proficiency in speaking and understanding Spanish. Three levels of oral Spanish proficiency were established as reference points on a continuum by using self-ratings, peer-ratings, and self-reports of usage. These impressions were verified by the number and type of errors made by each group, the number and type of verb forms correctly used, and the use of English. The study exposed the following general characteristics of the teenagers' Spanish: (1) comprehension exceeded expressive ability; (2) the verb system showed a great deal of variation, but there were no attempts to simplify it in a pidginization process; (3) the present perfect tense was not used; (4) the use of the subjunctive varied with the fluency of the speaker; and (5) the interviewer was not addressed with the third person singular. Fifteen adult Spanish speakers judged the acceptability of sentences transcribed from the interview. Unacceptable practices included English syntax and vocabulary, verbs incorrect for person or number, indicative used for subjunctive, and present or subjunctive used for conditional. (Author/JB)

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GRAMMATICAL PATTERNS IN THE SPOKEN SPANISH OF BILINGUAL TEENAGERS *

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1. Introduction. According to the U.S. Census of 1970, there are about 137,000 persons of Puerto Rican origin or parentage in New Jersey. Using a generous estimate, only about 500 of these persons live in the town of Red Bank (total population 11,000). The Puerto Rican community is not concentrated in one particular area of the town, nor do they have an active central meeting place, although one specialty food store and a Pentecostal church are occasionally active. There were, at the time of this study, 16 young teenagers (ages 12 to 16) who claimed Puerto Rican descent and some knowledge of Spanish attending the junior high school for this area. Fourteen of them agreed to be interviewed, twelve interviews were retained (six boys and six girls).

2. Interviews. The interviews were conducted in English and Spanish by a young Puerto Rican man who had been working as a bilingual aide in the school. The site of the interviews was the library of the local youth center. The teenagers were told that the purpose of the interview was to gather information for a book about bilingual teenagers. They were asked to speak in Spanish but English could be, and was, used if necessary. None of the persons interviewed had been exposed to any significant amount of Spanish during their schooling in

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the U.S. While the interviewer attempted to elicit spontaneous conversation with each person, the amount of time for each interview depended on the rapport he could achieve and the amount of time each felt willing to spend. The interviews ranged, then, from 30 minutes to over an hour. The general intent was to simulate a relaxed but semi-formal situation.

The tape-recorded sessions consisted of three sections: (1) a brief interview in English which asked for self-report measures of language usage and preference; (2) a self-estimate of the teenager's ability in spoken Spanish on a scale of zero to 100% and similar estimates of their peers in the interview group; and (3) the language elicitation section, which was conducted in Spanish and composed the greater part of the interview.

This elicitation section begins with a series of easy questions about the teenager's brothers and sisters, their ages, where they lived, etc. Other conversational questions follow, asking about interesting events in their lives, plans for the summer, hypothetical situations, and opinions about the school. The second section used a sequence of fourteen pictures to elicit specific verb tenses and syntactic patterns. A free translation task was given next, to elicit use of the imperative, the third person singular, and other structures. The final section consisted of three foreign language classroom drills involving the subjunctive. The interviews were transcribed and checked by at least one native speaker.

3. Range of Ability. As could be predicted from their self- and peer-ratings as well as from their answers to the background questions, the teenagers exhibited a wide range of ability in oral Spanish. The least proficient person could speak, literally, only a few words of Spanish, while the most proficient preferred Spanish to English. Those three or four who seemed to be least proficient rated themselves at 25 percent to 50 percent native-speaker ability and were rated by their peers at 30 to 35 percent (with one exception). Three of the four had never lived in Puerto Rico for more than three months at a time, they all have one parent who does not speak Spanish, and they claim little or no literacy in Spanish. Their use of Spanish was limited to conversations with monolingual older speakers and occasionally with those peers who prefer Spanish. They also claim to use English exclusively with their siblings.

A second group was made up of those five or six who rated themselves as about 50 to 75 percent as proficient as monolingual speakers. Their peers gave them approximately the same rating. The background data revealed that while this group also claimed to spoke Spanish at home with monolingual adults, English with siblings, and Spanish and English with their peers, they differed from the less fluent group by claiming more reading and writing ability and by the fact that most of them had lived in Puerto Rico for at least one year.

The three teenagers who rated themselves 87 to 100 percent proficient were rated 75 to 100 percent by their peers. Two of them had

studied in Puerto Rican schools and all claimed literacy in Spanish. In contrast to others in the study, these three teenagers said that they spoke Spanish as well as English with their siblings and that they preferred to watch TV in Spanish.

4. Analysis. An analysis of the interview transcripts showed certain linguistic characteristics which correlated with these subjective ratings. Those who judged themselves as least proficient produced the greatest number of obvious, "gross" errors. This was most noticeable in their treatment of verb tense, number, mood, and aspect markers. One person in this group, the most voluble of those interviewed, used 154 verbs--of which 35 were incorrectly marked. They also produced a variety of constructions which demonstrated a fluctuating control of case (*cuando pelean con yo), prepositions (*no tengo miedo a pelear), complementizers (*ella no quiere a yo trabajar), and occasional problems of gender agreement. We also find idiosyncratic noun and verb forms at this level (*amoldar for mudar and *manzanía for manzana). These four people resorted to English more frequently than the others, both for single words and for complete sentences. While they seemed to be aware that their Spanish contained obvious errors, they were not able to avoid them. As one said, "Cuando yo hablo español, an', y yo habla a los primos míos, ellos se pecen reir" (When I speak Spanish and I talk to my cousins, they begin to laugh).

The mid-range speakers were much less prone to verb errors, averaging about three or four obvious errors each, or less than ten

percent of their output. They used the present subjunctive more frequently, and the imperfect subjunctive was used correctly by all but one person in this group. Two persons used the pluperfect subjunctive spontaneously in reply to questions posed in this tense.

There was a continuing tendency to assign the masculine gender to all direct object pronouns, especially those whose referents were not mentioned in the preceding sentence, whether they were masculine or feminine. This lack of concord may be due to the fact that some of the Spanish words for objects in the picture were only partially familiar. Such words as cartera, payaso, florero, bastón, and espejo were not always available for retelling the stories, and this group tended to substitute eso, lo eso, and la cosa esa for nouns they could not remember. Apart from this one area, there were very few errors of adjective-noun agreement in person and gender.

The three most proficient speakers made even fewer errors of verb form. They used the subjunctive with greater fluency and correctness. There were no problems at this level with gender agreement, nor did they have as many problems with particular vocabulary items.

5. General Characteristics. In spite of the range of ability among the twelve people in this study, several common factors emerged. The most striking feature was their ability to comprehend and answer questions which contained structures they did not themselves use. With one exception, everyone was able to answer all but one or two of the questions.

Even the least proficient person, who produced only 25 utterances in Spanigh during the entire interview, was able to reply in English or Spanish to 33 of 46 conversational questions and 30 of 41 picture questions.

Another common characteristic was the non-use of the present perfect tense. The only time it was used was when it was repeated by two people in the drills. The majority changed the perfect to the preterite or the indefinite. The conditional (potential) and the future tense were also almost non-existent in this study, the former occuring twice, the latter only once. In spite of this, questions posed in the conditional and perfect were understood. In answering questions, the teenagers used the present, the infinitive, and the imperfect instead of the conditional, as "Interviewer: ¿Qué hariás si ganaras un millón de pesos? Answers: Ir a Puerto Rico. . . . Le tenía que dar la mitad al gobierno." References to future time were made using a periphrastic form ir a + verb.

In the indicative mood, everyone (again, except the least proficient person) used with fluency the present, the present and past continuous, the imperfect, the preterite, the periphrastic future, and verb phrases such as tener que + verb, querer + verb, and saber + verb. None of the persons interviewed tried to use a simplified verb system unmarked for person, number, tense, or mood, so their use of the Spanish verb system could not be said to be undergoing pidginizations.

The use of the subjunctive mood depended on the proficiency of the speaker. Taking the conversation and picture questions, we find that

the present subjunctive was used only once or twice by the least proficient group while the others used it more frequently and fluently. The imperfect subjunctive was used by six persons of mid and higher proficiency, while the pluperfect subjunctive was used by five persons in this range. In the drills, the subjunctive was used after para que, con tal que, and a menos que by the most fluent while the mid range used both the indicative and subjunctive and the least fluent used only the indicative. Sentences with me alegro que and dudo que were less effective in eliciting the subjunctive. Only two people used the subjunctive in these environments, alternating it with the indicative.

The attempt to elicit the use of the third person singular was not successful. Only a few persons spontaneously used usted or the third person singular form of the imperative. One person who decided to use usted with the interviewer subsequently mentioned el reloj tuyo and tu esposa. There were two ways used by the more proficient to signify that they were speaking to older persons when making requests: (1) poder + verb, as Puede sentarse (for siéntese) and ¿Me puede decir la verdad? (for dígame), and (2) adding por favor to the second person form as in Siéntate, por favor (for siéntese).

6. Adult Survey. In order to determine which of the forms considered deviant in this study were actually acceptable to bilingual adults, a group of 15 adult speakers were asked to judge whether certain tape recorded sentences were "good, acceptable, or bad" in the context of a

conversation with a bilingual teenager here in the United States.

The most universally unacceptable sentences included (1) English syntax and vocabulary ("la otra gente's yarda"), (2) verbs incorrectly marked for person or number ("el policía lo cogí"), (3) indicative used for subjunctive ("para que no le cogen"). Less marked, but still unacceptable to the majority, were (1) certain forms of English influence ("cachándolos" for catching them) and (2) present or subjunctive substituted for the conditional (" Qué tú hariás si . . .? Me voy . . ." or "Yo cambiara todo"). Acceptable to about half the adults was the use of the imperfect for the conditional (" Qué hubiera pasado si no hubiera corrido? La guagua se le pasaba.").

More acceptable were some dialect forms (". . . haigas aprendido, . . . me gusta correr bicicleta). Almost completely acceptable were " ¿Puedes hacer esto por mi?" "octubre veinticuatro," and " ¿Qué harías si fueras presidents? Bajar los precios."

7. Summary. Three general levels of oral Spanish proficiency were established as reference points on a continuum by using self-ratings, peer-ratings, and self-reports of usage. These subjective impressions were verified by the number and type of errors made by each group, the number and type of verb forms correctly used, and the use of English. Comprehension exceeded production. The verb system showed a great deal of variation, but there were no attempts to simplify it in a pidginization process. The teenagers were in general agreement that proficiency

in Spanish is a desirable goal and that life in Puerto Rico is much nicer than in New Jersey. In spite of this generally positive attitude toward the Spanish language and Puerto Rican culture, most of the teenagers in this study show the effects of limited exposure to the language.